Miawpukek official requested federal oversight of hydrogen project

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Body

A concerned citizens group on the Port au Port Peninsula has asked the federal government to designate a giant wind-to-hydrogen development in the region for review by the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada (IACC).

And they appear to have support from an unlikely source: Miawpukek First Nation (MFN) at Conne River.

The Mi'kmaw band is a partner in another proposal for a wind-hydrogen project on the east coast of Newfoundland.

ABO Wind Canada Ltd. is working with MFN and Braya Renewable Fuels on developing a multi-phased, integrated project under the name Toqlukuti'k Wind and Hydrogen Ltd. The idea is to produce green hydrogen to meet the needs of the Braya Come By Chance Refinery and for global export.

That project is only in the early stages of conception, but was one of only four proposals that made the cut this week among dozens of land-use bids originally submitted to the province.

Contacted Friday, Sept. 1, MFN Chief Mi'sel Joe said he was unaware of the correspondence to the federal minister, but an electronic copy is contained on the IAAC's website along with the original request by the Environmental Transparency Committee (ETC).

It's signed by Ross Hinks, MFN's director of natural resources.

Hinks could not be reached for comment.

The MFN letter to federal Environment and Climate Change Minister Steven Guilbeault, dated June 12, is clearly worded as a request for federal designation.

"I'm writing on behalf of Miawpukek First Nation to request that the Port au Port-Stephenville Wind Power and Hydrogen Generation Project be designated as a federal Impact Assessment under subsection 9(1) of the Impact Assessment Act," it begins.

Over seven pages, Hinks echoes similar arguments contained in the 30-page missive filed by the Environmental Transparency Committee on the Port au Port Peninsula.

"A project of this scale absolutely must undergo a full federal Impact Assessment. This is because of the massive scope/magnitude which will have potential effects on the health, cultural heritage, and rights of Indigenous people."

The project, however, has been endorsed by the Qalipu First Nation as well as local band chiefs in the area.

The ETC submitted its request to Guilbeault in April, asking that Project Nujio'Qonik proposed by World Energy GH2 undergo a federal impact assessment.

That request was then forwarded to the IAAC, where officials first checked whether the development wasn't already on its project list under the Physical Activities Regulations.

"On July 5, 2023, the agency was able to confirm that the project was not identified in the Project List, and the 90-day legislated timeline began," the IAAC said in a statement to The Telegram this week.

"The minister will provide his response to the Environmental Transparency Committee, including the reasons for his determination, within the 90-day timeline. The proponent will also be notified of the minister's determination, and the response will be posted to the Canadian Impact Assessment Registry."

That means a decision should be announced by early October.

The provincial government has set a deadline of Oct. 11 for public responses to World Energy's 4,100-page environmental impact statement filed late last month.

World Energy CEO Sean Leet told The Telegram Friday the company has responded to the ETC request, and said a federal impact assessment is not warranted.

"The federal process is not, as we understand it, what's required here based on the nature of the project," he said.

In its letter to the minister, however, the ETC insists the project has all the earmarks of one that meets the criteria for federal oversight.

"(I)n our opinion, the project should receive the most rigorous assessment possible so that a clear precedent for all future wind/hydrogen/ammonia projects is set, especially those within proximity to coastal waters and which will impact upon federal areas of jurisdiction," the committee wrote. "We do not yet know all the risks and impacts of these projects, and the learning curve will take time. Fast-tracking a unique project of this nature could prove disastrous for future generations and for the climate."

The letter also highlighted a comment made by Guilbeault earlier this year, as reported in the Narwhal, with respect to housing projects proposed for Ontario greenbelt lands.

Guilbeault said he "would not hesitate to stop any development that may have a profound impact on species at risk in Canada."

World Energy's environmental impact statement identifies several plant and wildlife species in the Port au Port region that are rare and even endangered, but Leet says their research has only identified one rare plant species that may require special accommodation.

"For instance, the transmission corridors, should we get approval to proceed, may not be able to go in a straight line. We will have to work around some of these areas."

As for the unprecedented elements of the project — including placing massive turbines meant for offshore generation on dry land, Leet says they are consulting with experts who know what they're doing.

"We've got engineers from all over the world, some of the brightest minds in the industry, working with us on this," he said, adding that turbines in general have increased in size and scale over the years as the industry progresses.

The ETC has also complained the project has grown substantially since it was registered for environmental review last year, since only the initial phase of the project — the Port au Port turbines and hydrogen plant at Stephenville — was included for environmental review.

Since then, the environmental impact statement has added proposals for a similar wind farm near Stephenville and one on the Angille Mountains near Codroy Valley.

But Leet says the company consulted government officials during the process and received their blessing.

“The industry is developing extremely quickly and our project is moving fast as well,” he said, “and all of this is an effort to respond to Canada’s commitment to Germany (for green hydrogen) … but also we feel a strong call to action around what’s happening with the climate.”

The project has attracted the attention of other environmental groups, including the Council of Canadians, Enviro Watch NL, and the Social Justice Co-operative.

"This World Energy mega-project is not 'green energy' at all," Helen Forsey of the Council of Canadians Avalon/NL Chapter said in a recent news release. "Its construction alone will require huge amounts of fossil fuels and earth minerals, and its operation will rely on power from the provincial grid to cover fluctuations in the wind source.”

In a letter to The Telegram, Enviro Watch’s Alison Dyer said the project represents the kind of overconsumption and corporate excess that led to climate change in the first place.

“It’s based on the same economic growth system characterized by corporate colonialism and environmental degradation that has put us under existential threat,” she wrote. "It will do little, if anything, to mitigate the climate crisis, will lose us valuable time, and will destroy what we value most about our beautiful province.”

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